

Wake Up with Jacob sermon series
Sermon #3 – What Goes Around Comes Around
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For this summer sermon series we're taking a look at the life of Israel, the offspring of Abraham and Isaac who became the bearer of God's promise and the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. But before he matured into that role, he was Jacob, a scoundrel, a swindler who stole his brother's birthright and his father's blessing. His brother Esau was so mad at Jacob he wanted to kill him, so Jacob fled his homeland to go and live with his uncle Laban.

We wondered how God was going to work through this good-for-nothing crook to bring about the extravagant promises God had made. Last week we heard about a rest stop that Jacob took along his journey. While sleeping he dreamt about a ladder reaching to heaven, and he heard God bestow the same promises of blessing upon him that God had given to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. God also promised Jacob, who was all alone on his exile from home, that God would be with him and would make sure that the promise of blessing was fulfilled through him. In return, Jacob promised to have faith and trust in God, to claim God as his own. We were given a glimmer of hope that maybe, maybe, Jacob was beginning to think about more than his own welfare and well-being. Maybe Jacob was expanding his circle of interest beyond himself, maybe he was making room for someone else in his life.

After his dream Jacob hits the road again and arrives in Paddan Aram, the home of his uncle Laban and his family. Jacob walks up to the local watering hole, which was literally a hole full of water, a well with a large stone covering it. He asks some of the locals about Laban, and they tell him that not only does his uncle live nearby, but that his beautiful daughter Rachel was on her way right now to provide water for their sheep.

The 80s sitcom "Full House" is a very popular one in our household these days. One of the characters is Jesse, played by John Stamos. Jesse is a slick rocker who has a way with women. Every time Jesse sees a pretty girl, he says his signature line: "Have mercy!" Well, when Jacob first laid eyes on Rachel, after he rolled his tongue back up and picked his jaw up off the floor, he must have exclaimed, "Have mercy!"

We guys are vulnerable to such reactions, you know. I remember in fifth grade at Prestonia Elementary school in Louisville, Kentucky, I had a huge crush on Kimberly Hensley, but I was always too shy to talk to her. On our field day, near the end of school, I was signed up for the running race. As I lined up alongside the other boys, I looked over at Kimberly, hoping she would be watching. Not only was she watching, but she smiled at me and waved. Hoo boy! I could almost feel the whiskers growing on my chin as I forcibly willed myself to look more manly. I took off running as fast as I could, glancing over at Kim to make sure she was still watching. That glance kept me from seeing the rock in front of me, and just as I look forward again I tripped, landing with a thud and skidding a good 10 feet.

We men have this peculiar of reacting strangely when we see a woman we like. We start strutting around like a peacock, puffing out our chests and sucking in our bellies. We start looking for things to fix or jars to open as a way of making an impression. We're guys, it's what we do.

And it's certainly what Jacob does. Normally, the shepherds gathered at the watering hole have to wait until all of them are there to move the heavy stone from the well. But Jacob, in a moment of Hulk-like machismo, walks over and lifts the stone all by himself, and then offers water to Rachel for her flock. And yet, this is not the Jacob we have come to know. This is not the "looking out for number one," "me, myself, and I" Jacob we have seen in the past. Jacob going out of his way to do something for someone else? What's going on here?

Jacob goes with Rachel to meet Laban, and takes up residence in Laban's household. After a month there, Laban and Jacob make an agreement. Laban wanted to pay Jacob for his work, but all Jacob could think about was Rachel, so he makes a deal. Normally, the prospective husband would pay a dowry for the right to marry a woman, but Jacob fled his homeland with nothing. So in place of money, he offers his services. I'll work for you for seven years if you'll give me Rachel as my wife.

Now, Laban is a smart man, and he may be even more cunning than Jacob, if that's possible. So Laban responds to Jacob's request by saying, "I think it would be great if you married Rachel." Notice he didn't say "Yes" to the agreement, but Jacob is so lovestruck that he doesn't pay much attention to the response. So he works for seven years in Laban's household, all the while assuming that the fruits of his labor will be the hand of Rachel in marriage.

Jacob finishes his seven years of work and says to Laban, "All right, Uncle. Give me what I've earned." So Laban calls together a party for a wedding feast. These feasts were lavish affairs, usually lasting several days, and you'll be surprised to find out that wine was involved. My guess is the groom had more than his fair share of the fruit of the vine to celebrate his nuptials, maybe even getting so sloppy drunk that he couldn't tell the difference between two sisters, and Laban takes advantage of the situation.

Instead of waking up to Rachel, who the Bible tells us was "lovely in form and beautiful," Jacob turns over in his bed to discover he has been given and consummated his marriage to Leah, the one with the "weak eyes." The word "weak" in Hebrew is translated in other places as "tender" or "delicate." It's at this point that Scripture begins to nudge us in the ribs a bit to show us the humor of what is taking place. We were told when they were born that Esau was the fiery one, while Jacob was gentle, the sensitive type. So you can see the irony in the fact that Jacob falls in love with the beautiful, fiery Rachel, only to marry the gentle, tender Leah.

The joke on Jacob doesn't end there. He runs to Laban and exclaims, "What is this you have done to me?" which is probably the exact same thing Esau said to Jacob after Jacob tricked him out of his birthright. And then, Uncle Laban drops the bomb. He says, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one."

Bam! Right in between Jacob's eyes. His moment of clarity must have been so painful that he forgot his hangover. Jacob, the younger brother who blatantly ignored local customs about the older serving the younger and deceived his older brother to get the upper hand, has now himself been deceived on the basis of these very same customs. Isaac Newton said that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Jesus said in Matthew that all those who live by the sword would die by the sword. I say what goes around comes around.

Jacob, who lived by his wits, has been outwitted. The deceiver has been deceived. Is this God's justice, an eye for an eye and a deception for deception? Is this God saying, "What goes around comes around?" I don't think so. I don't think God operates that way. The God I believe in is not an "eye for an eye" God. The God I worship is a "love your enemy" God, a God who, instead of punishing us for our sins, sent us mercy and forgiveness through his Son Jesus Christ.

So where then is God while all this chicanery is going on? There's certainly an imbalance between human and divine action here. We've heard enough in Jacob's story about how humans choose to relate and be in relationship, through lies and tricks and deception. These do not seem to be the kind of characters God chooses to mix with. And yet, the promise lives on, and it lives on through Jacob and his wives. Jacob's unwanted marriage to Leah can be understood as part of God's plan, because she will give birth to two sons, Levi and Judah, who will become the heads of two of the most important tribes of Israel. Levi will become the priestly tribe, responsible for the religious matters of the Israelites, and Judah will become the governing tribe, from which will come the monarchy of King David, and eventually Jesus of Nazareth.

Just as God chose to become entangled in the messiness of Jacob's life in order to fulfill God's promise of blessing, so God chose to become entangled in the messiness of our world by sending Jesus Christ to fulfill God's promise of forgiveness and new life, just as God chooses to become entangled in the messiness of each of our lives in order to fulfill God's promise of constant, abiding presence: "I am with you."

God is at work in another place here. You might expect Jacob to react to Laban's double-cross with his typical impatience, storming away in anger or fleeing once again. Instead, he agrees to work seven MORE years in order to marry Rachel. Seven more years. There's no explanation for that other than love. The transformation of Jacob is being to take shape. The one who was born in conflict, the one who struggled with his brother, the one who manipulated situations to his own benefit, is changing. He used to love being in control; he has spent his life grasping at things he wanted. But anyone who's ever loved knows that to love someone means not to grasp, but to give away, not to hold onto control, but to give it up for the sake of another.

Jacob loved Rachel, in a deep, soul-stirring way, and his love for her knew no time limits or boundaries. It will be through his love for her that God's promise of blessing and offspring will be carried on. Maybe, just maybe, as his love for Rachel grew, Jacob was beginning to understand just how much he was loved by God. He's not there yet; there's still more struggle ahead for him. But there's also hope, hope that the promise-stealer who has become the promise-bearer will transform into the promise-fulfiller as he learns to love and to be loved. For it is through our love of others lived out each day that God works to bring about God's kingdom here on earth.